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ABSTRACT

"Grammar Graphics" is a technique for teaching English grammar to children in grades three through five using symbols to represent each part of speech. In this way children can graphically perceive and understand the function of words in a sentence. Basically the students learn symbols for all parts of speech except the preposition and conjunction (interjections are not included). There are six symbols (nouns as circles, verbs as triangles, articles as arrows, adjectives as squares, adverbs as rectangles, and pronouns as ovals), with the verbs as triangles varying in size according to its function in a sentence. Conjunctions and prepositions are always written out as words so that from the very beginning the students become sensitive to the special function of the preposition. By distinguishing the preposition, the teacher can illustrate immediately the adjectival or adverbial phrase that follows prepositions. The use of the symbols can also underscore the fact that the same word in a different position has a different meaning and a different grammatical function. Although the use of symbols in one sense makes grammar initially seem more abstract, the symbolization in another sense actually makes grammar more meaningful and much more fun. A variety of activities can be incorporated in teaching Grammar Graphics, some of which allow a multimodal approach to learning. Ultimately, this approach helps children understand syntax so that they can write effective sentences in paragraphs that, in turn, reflect unity and coherence. (HOD)

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GRAMMAR GRAPHICS

A Novel Look at Syntax

IDEAS AND TECHNIQUES FOR TEACHING SENTENCE COMPETENCY

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Grammar Graphics[1]

Grammar Graphics is an innovative technique for teaching English grammar to children in grades 3-5. Through the use of symbols which represent each part of speech, children can graphically/visually perceive and understand the function of words in a sentence. This is possible because the position of particular parts of speech relative to one another in a sentence is made quite obvious through the use of these symbols.

There are several advantages to this symbolic approach. First, grammar instruction can be successfully introduced very early in the elementary grades.[2] Many, if not all, the parts of speech along with simple sentence diagramming can be taught by the end of 4th grade, thus enabling more rapid, in-depth grammar comprehension and sentence diagramming in the 5th grade.

Second, this grammar approach works well with all children ranging from the gifted to the moderately learning disabled. While it provides a structured method of teaching syntax, it encourages the development of various thinking abilities, which are necessary for all children. The students are able to generate sentences from prescribed graphic patterns. After prescribed patterns are learned, flexibility within a pattern can be taught. Almost simultaneously students are able to create their own patterns. Consequently, within the parameter of the building blocks of a sentence, an impetus is provided for flexible, original thinking. A strong notion of "sentencehood" develops. Because the students critique one another's writing, they also learn how to participate in group evaluative interactions.

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[1] © October, 1979

[2] Nouns and regular verbs can be presented in 1st and 2nd grades by using manipulative symbols and body movements. The terminology would be omitted.

Third, Grammar Graphics also encourages sentence comprehension and vocabulary growth so that as more sentences are understood and more effective sentences are produced, reading comprehension is improved. Reading/writing techniques such as the cloze procedure can be utilized in a variety of ways. Having the students paraphrase the sentences produced also aids in sentence comprehension and provides new ways to pattern the sentences. Furthermore, an assortment of questions can be posed about the sentences so that as the students respond to the questions and become sensitive to word options and word functions, they can utilize this understanding to generate more sentences.

Fourth, Grammar Graphics provides a framework in which to compare more readily the position/function of certain words in English relative to the position/function of those words in a second language, such as Spanish, French, or German. This has positive implications for young children who study languages other than English.

Fifth, the ultimate aim of this grammar technique is to make students more effective writers. Truly understanding the ordering of words in a sentence and being able to write effective sentences leads to a better execution and comprehension of sentences in a paragraph. After "ordering of words" is really understood, the skill of "ordering of sentences" in a paragraph hopefully becomes easier.

Finally, the interest that this graphic approach motivates and the sense of control students have over their grammar understanding are very strong. These are essential in helping decide whether a teaching/learning approach has value.

Grammar Graphics is simple to teach and to learn. Initially, it was developed in order to teach 4th grade students grammar. Basically, students learn symbols for all parts of speech except the preposition and conjunction (interjections are not included). There are six symbols, with the triangle, , the verb, varying in its size according to its function in a sentence.

noun

noun marker (determiner/ article)

adjective

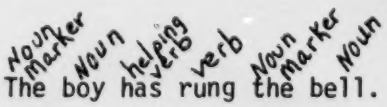
verb

adverb

pronoun

The triangle, , the verb symbol, is used as a small triangle denoting the 'linking verb', as a large triangle denoting the regular verb, and a small-large triangle in tandem denoting the auxiliary (helping) verb and participle. Conjunctions and prepositions are always written out as words so that the students from the very beginning are sensitive to the special function the preposition particularly plays. Students learn immediately to recognize as prepositions words such as 'in', 'under', and 'above'. By focusing upon prepositions in this way, some of the problems usually encountered in simple diagramming are later avoided. The students learn early that the preposition has a special connecting function to those words that precede it and follow it. By distinguishing the preposition, the teacher can immediately illustrate the part of the sentence which follows prepositions, a part of the sentence that tells 'what kind of' or 'where', the adjective or adverbial phrase.[3]

A common grammar teaching technique has been to take a sentence and show the students how to label the function of each word. Let's focus on the word "rung" in the following sentence, "The boy has rung the bell." When we traditionally label it, the sentence looks something like this:



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[3] A suggested sequence of teaching Grammar Graphics appears at the end of the article.

When we consider the sentence, "The rung was rusty," labeling looks like this:

noun marker Noun linking verb adjective
The rung was rusty.

In both sentences the letters or words denoting the function of each word do not offer any contrast to the specific word being considered. Students somehow must visualize that "rung", the verb, when moved to a different position in the sentence becomes "rung" the noun. Some children are confounded by the labeling addition of further words or letters to the original sentence. While labeling becomes a herculean task for some children, it becomes an uncreative task for others.

However, if a set of symbols is agreed upon to represent specific parts of speech, the teacher can demonstrate that "rung" as a verb (▽) in the sentence "The boy has ▽ the bell" is in a different position when used as a noun (○) in the sentence, "The ○ was rusty." The same word functions in a different position in the sentence and, therefore, has a different meaning. After enough symbols have been taught, students take the sentence

↑ ○ ▽ ▼ ↑ ○
(The boy has rung the bell)

and compare it with

↑ ● ▽ □
(The rung was rusty).

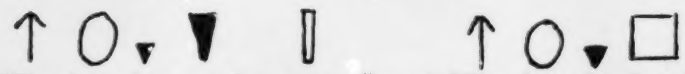
The use of the symbols can underscore that the same word in a different position has a different meaning and a different grammatical function.

Grammar Graphics enables the student to gain an understanding of possessive pronouns. We teach that words such as "my", "our", and "his" are possessive pronouns in a list. But, when placed in a sentence before a noun, "My cat is big.", these possessive pronouns must function as adjectives. This can be very confusing, to say the least. By using the symbols, ■ ○ ▽ □, the ■ represents the adjective.

In this case, ■ represents the word "my", as a modifier of a noun, and must function as an adjective because of its position in the sentence. The use of possessive pronouns as modifiers that function as adjectives is not only a comprehension task but a visual processing task that is made easier by Grammar Graphics.

The procedures involved in teaching this symbolic approach are straightforward. First, the circle ○ is introduced as representing a 'thing'.[4] In the sentence, "The ○ ran away", the teacher poses the questions, "What kinds of things could fit into the sentence?" The class would then brainstorm. As fluent level thinking is invoked, the students come up with a variety of answers. The same kind of procedures can be used with a sentence like, "The ○ ran down the ○ ." The nouns can then be categorized. By working with these kinds of sentence patterns, and then categorizing, nouns become more understandable as things, people, and places. Students can create their own sentences. Noun markers are introduced immediately and more sentence patterns are practiced in which the symbols ↑○ are inserted.

Very soon after the noun and noun marker are introduced, the verb is introduced as well as the adjective. One of the most difficult concepts to teach and to be understood by young children is the difference between the linking (state of being) verb and the auxiliary verb. With this graphic technique, the most difficult aspects are side stepped. In the sentences,



"The boy is running away," and "The boy is fat,"

a student can visually distinguish the difference in the function of the verb 'is'.

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4 The sequence can be changed by introducing the regular verb first.

Hooked onto the main verb in the first sentence, the word 'is' is not alone. It actually is helping the main verb to function or exist properly, whereas in the second sentence, the word 'is' has a life of its alone. The visual baseline is that after an auxiliary verb the large triangle ▼▽ always appears, and nothing else. After a linking verb, these combinations will always appear ▼↑○, ▼○, or ▼□ .

Although the use of symbols in one sense makes grammar initially seem more abstract, the symbolization makes grammar actually more quickly meaningful and much more fun. It is important to know that eventually after enough parts of speech are learned, just a sentence or phrase of symbols are used. The following patterns can be eventually given and the students create a variety of meanings to fulfill the patterns. Vocabulary growth is given a great impetus at this point. After the first words are provided by the students, they can seek synonymns that strengthen and deepen the mood or tone of the sentence or phrase. Shades of meanings can be discussed.

1. □ ○
2. ↑ □ ○ ▽
3. ↑ □ □ ○ ▽
4. □ □ ○ ▽
5. □ □ □ ○ ▽ ▯
6. ↑ □ ○ ▽ and ↑ □ ○ ▽
7. ↑ □ ○ ▿ ▽ ▯
8. ↑ ○ ▿ □

Within the course of the year that a 4th grade class had graphics, the students were able to use such patterns as

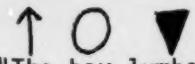
↑ □ ○ ▿▽ down ↑ □ ○.

One of the great virtues of this approach has also been that the teacher could easily present parallel sentence construction. The following pattern was successfully incorporated in student writing many times:

↑ □ ○ ▽ ▯ and ↑ □ ○ ▽ ▯.

The students created a lot of their own patterns. Eventually, the class became more sensitive to writing this kind of sentence correctly.

Students also became more sensitive to the variety of meanings a word can have. For example, they learned that the verb 'lumber' in the sentence,

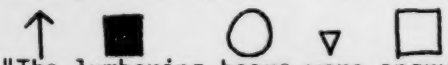


"The boy lumbers"

had a different position as well as meaning when the word lumber was used as a noun in the sentence,

"The lumber fell"

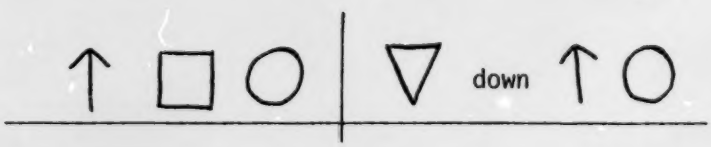
and served as still a different part of speech in the sentence,



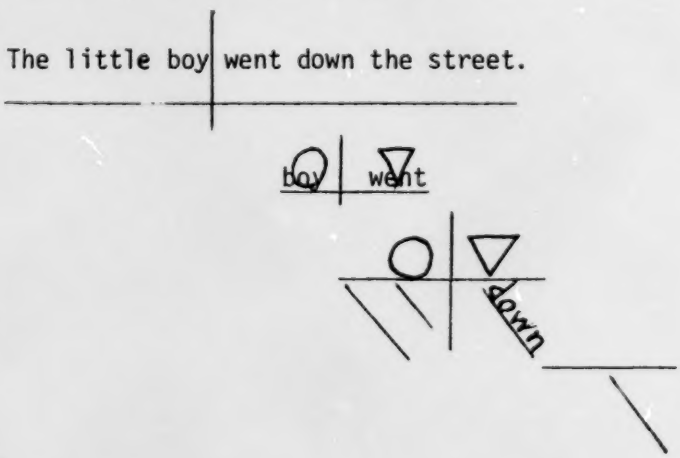
"The lumbering bears were angry."

Because prepositions were written out and their purpose as a type of connector discussed, the children grew to recognize prepositions within sentences quite readily. As a result, once students could divide sentences into subject and predicate, they quickly began sentence diagramming.

Sentence divided into subject and predicate.



The next step was to take out the "kernel" of the sentence for diagramming.



The children could visualize that the subject noun took its describing words with it, and that the adverbially phrases were set up as part of the verb's family patterns. Graphic patterns were set up as above and each child generated her own sentence and diagrammed it. In diagramming, emphasis was placed upon the sameness of the pattern following the preposition and that of the subject noun and its modifiers. It should be noted that in a particular 4th grade grammar class it was easier to introduce adverbially phrases before introducing adjective phrases. In some 4th grade classes the students were able to diagram simple sentences containing linking verbs as well as direct objects.

The beauty of Grammar Graphics is that the parts of speech are introduced rapidly. There is no need to say to a student, "Well, we'll get to that later after we finish adjectives." Students are given surface graphic exposure and then deepen their understandings of each part of speech through intensive work with patterns. Needless to say, sentence combining and sentence expansion techniques are readily utilized.

The students were always given a pattern to fill in at the end of every language arts class whether or not grammar was covered that day. Patterns were always shared with one another. Some patterns were provided by the teacher; many patterns were created by the children. There was, therefore, constant repetition but in a 'fun' context. For example, when learning adjectives, each student was asked to pick out one noun, but not tell anyone what it was. The class then listed a variety of adjectives without knowing about one another's nouns. After the list of adjectives was placed on the blackboard with the □ heading one column and the ○ marking the other column, each student provided her noun and it was matched against each adjective.

There are a variety of activities that can be incorporated in teaching Grammar Graphics, some of which allow a multi-modal approach to learning. Large pieces of paper can be cut into several symbols. Some children can be circles (nouns) while other children can be squares (adjectives, etc.). Small groups of students create their own patterns, and by holding up their symbol, they align themselves appropriately next to one another to reflect the syntax of their sentence. Symbols can be cut from styrofoam and can be manipulated on a flat surface. Other symbols can be made from formica or plywood. Sentence games using the cut symbols can be developed. Card games similar to Fish can be played. Bulletin boards can reflect the on-going symbolic development of the parts of speech learned, using pictures from magazines or the students' own drawings to explain parts of speech.

The ultimate objective in this approach is to help children understand syntax so that they can write effective sentences in paragraphs that, in turn, reflect unity and coherence. The big step is to make their awareness of word order and structure within the sentence transfer into well ordered effective paragraphs. Therefore, the class writes paragraphs as much as possible. There is a wealth of expository/descriptive writing ideas in which a class can participate, many of them growing out of subject related interests. Being ever aware that the purpose of writing is to communicate, the children frequently write for one another and thereby also learn to evaluate one another's work. As much individual attention as possible is given to their writing through teacher conferences. Individual folders containing all their writing samples are kept so that each student can observe her growth. Very slowly, and granted the long term results are not all in, the students seem to have a greater sensitivity to usage, more effective sentences are being created, and paragraph coherence is becoming stronger.

Grammer Graphics is an unusual grammar approach for students and teachers. The novelty of the symbolization and clarity it brings to the analysis of grammar provides enjoyable productive interaction between the students and teacher and encourages students to improve their writing skills. The attention this approach gives to the building blocks of the sentence also increases sentence reading comprehension. Although Grammar Graphics has not been attempted with older students, who have long term problems in understanding grammar and in writing clearly, there is the strong possibility that it can work at a remedial level of instruction.

GRAMMAR GRAPHICS

A. Parts of Speech — Symbol

1. Noun Marker
2. Noun
3. Adjective
4. Pronoun
5. Verb
6. Auxiliary Verb
   Linking Verb
7. Auxiliary Verb-Verb
8. Adverb
9. Preposition
   and
10. Conjunction

Words are written out:

in	and
over	but
under	because
by	
through	

B. Sequence Suggested:

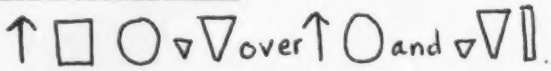
1. Introduce nouns. — The dog barked.
2. Introduce noun markers. — The dog barked.
3. Introduce regular verbs. — The dog barked.
4. Introduce complete subject and complete predicate. — The dog | barked.

   Refer to simple subject and simple predicate as "kernel" or "core" of sentence.

5. Introduce adjectives. — The brown dog barked.
6. Introduce adverbs. — The brown dog barked loudly.
* 7. Introduce preposition and prepositional phrases. — The brown dog barked loudly in my ear.
8. Introduce auxiliary verbs. — The brown dog has barked.
9. Introduce linking verbs — The brown dog is noisy.

* Use pictures to help convey meaning of particular prepositions.

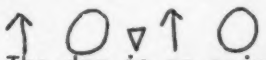
C. Sentence Generating

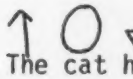
1. 

The brown cow has jumped over the fence and has run away.

(A variety of possibilities are available to the child. Decide what main will be. Then, proceed.)

2.
The lady is fat.


The dog is an animal.

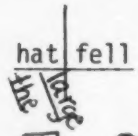

The cat has eaten.

(Note position of linking verb and auxiliary to type of word that follows it. Linking verb never precedes a verb.)

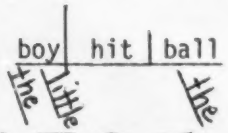
D. Sentence Diagramming

Refer to main noun as subject noun, main verb as main verb. Use 2 colored chalks to differentiate further subject noun from main verb.

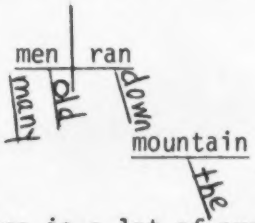
1. The large hat fell.



2. The little boy hit the ball. (direct object)



3. Many old men ran down the mountain.



At each step there is a lot of practice with each pattern: marking the sentences with symbols and developing own sentences from a given symbol statement. Gerund, participle, and infinitive graphic symbols exist for older students, but have not been experimentally used to date.